

**COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA**  
**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS POLICY**

**Subject**

Gender-Responsive Services for Juvenile Female Offenders  
and At-Risk Young Women and Girls

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**Introduction**

An alarming increase in criminal behavior by young women and girls has made them the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system. Juvenile female offenders must be held accountable for their behavior. However, the County of San Diego must also support a continuum of prevention, intervention, treatment, supervision, and ongoing care that is gender-responsive in order to maximize sound decision making and positive development for at-risk young women and girls. Programming will focus on girls' unique psychological, social, and developmental needs.

**Purpose**

To clarify, facilitate, and enhance the County of San Diego's commitment to preventing female juvenile delinquency and promoting positive development of at-risk girls. To improve the ability of the juvenile justice system and related County services to identify and address the specific and unique needs of at-risk girls and juvenile female offenders.

**Definition of Gender-Responsive Services for Girls**

Gender-responsive services for girls are those services whose content, delivery, and cultural orientation addresses the unique needs and characteristics of young women and girls. The goal of these services is to prevent or reduce female juvenile delinquency and promote positive development of at-risk girls. Services will encourage healthy attitudes, behaviors, and life styles, as well as promote responsible decision making and self-reliance.

**Background**

For young women and girls, the path to adulthood often features very different developmental experiences, challenges, and problems than those faced by young men and boys. Addressing and preventing female juvenile delinquency requires gender-responsive solutions.

In general, adolescent girls have a high incidence of physical, sexual, and emotional victimization, depression, and low self-esteem that are directly linked to at-risk behaviors. In San Diego County, female juvenile offenders are more likely than males to suffer from chronic substance abuse, have little or no parental control in their lives, and have poor school attendance and performance. Additionally, many juvenile female

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offenders are pregnant at the time of their incarceration, and many other at-risk girls become mothers at an early age.

As the alarming increase in female juvenile delinquency shows, there is an urgent need to address the challenges facing at-risk young women and girls. Yet, despite the rapid increase in criminal behavior by young women and girls, there are comparatively few specialized programs and services designed to meet their unique issues and needs. Appropriate attention to prevention, intervention, treatment, supervision, and ongoing care of at-risk and delinquent young women and girls has been lacking.

Too many young women and girls are falling prey to cycles of self-destructive behavior and crime that lead to broken lives and incarceration. If left unchanged, these cycles will rob our daughters of their futures, erode our citizens' quality of life, and impose enormous costs on our justice, health, and social service systems. This Board Policy will enhance and guide the process of addressing both the immediate programmatic and long-term strategic needs of at-risk young women and girls.

**Guiding Principles:**

The psychosocial perspective and developmental needs of young women and girls are very different from those of young men and boys. Effective programming for at-risk girls and juvenile female offenders must address the unique characteristics and needs of young women and girls.

Adolescent girls have a high incidence of physical, sexual, and emotional victimization, depression and low self-esteem that are directly linked to at-risk behaviors, including delinquency.

Effective service delivery for girls requires providers with a comprehensive understanding of their psychosocial perspective and developmental needs. Programming and training should be gender responsive and reflect knowledge of the diverse backgrounds and issues of the girls served.

Programming adapted to girls' developmental needs is more likely to result in positive outcomes, including healthy attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles, as well as responsible decision making and self-reliance.

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Involvement with at least one significant positive adult, a positive peer group, core social institutions, and the community is critical in providing effective and lasting outcomes for girls.

Wherever appropriate, families should continue to play the primary role in the development of young girls. Programs at all levels should provide services that include the family in addressing the problems that lead to delinquency. Services should involve the family in assessment, case management, service delivery, and ongoing care.

Serious, chronic, and violent juvenile female offenders must be held accountable for their behavior with swift and certain sanctions.

**Program and Policy Priorities**

1. The design and implementation of gender-responsive programs for girls will be research-based and results driven, incorporating measurable outcomes.
2. Aggressive and sustained efforts to seek state, federal, and private foundation funding sources to augment County commitments are integral to the development and implementation of these services.
3. Programming shall address family issues, such as fragmentation (e.g. loss, death, illness, or incarceration of loved ones) and girls' experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual victimization. These issues contribute significantly to at-risk and delinquent behavior.
4. Physical and mental health assessment, intervention, and treatment are essential components of gender-responsive programming.
5. School difficulties and negative attitudes toward school, as evidenced by anti-social behavior, failing grades, truancy, and dropping out, both reflect and contribute to at-risk behavior. Services for young women and girls that support academic performance and remove barriers to girls' success in school are essential components of gender-responsive programming.
6. Services for girls must include development of vocational skills promoting the capacity of young women to sustain independence and self-reliance. Services will include basic information about the work environment, professional behavior, and planning for the future.

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7. An essential component of gender-responsive service delivery is ensuring that at-risk girls and their families know what programs are available and how to utilize neighborhood and core social institutions for future problem solving. Gender-responsive programs must be part of an integrated and accessible service delivery network.

8. Programming must help at-risk girls and juvenile female offenders develop and strengthen personal support networks, including positive peer group and mentors, in order to foster positive behaviors and effective decision making skills.

9. The ultimate goal of gender-responsive programs must be to engender self-reliance. Services for young women and girls must include information and counseling on basic life skills, such as personal finances, career goals and parenting, in order to assist their development into responsible, successful, and self-sufficient adults.

**Sunset Date**

This policy will be reviewed for continuance by 12-31-04.

**CAO REFERENCE**

Chief Administrative Officer and Chief Probation Officer

**Board Action**

11-16-99 (1)